

Working at Playboy

In 1981 I moved from my tiny hometown in Central Florida to the gigantic metropolis of Los Angeles, where I didn't know a soul. I had just finished a photography program at the community college in Daytona Beach and needed a big change in my life. At the time, I didn't understand that there was any way to make a living at photography other than working for a newspaper or shooting weddings, but I knew I had a calling and some talent with a camera. In high school I was the yearbook photographer and at UCF I was head photographer at the school newspaper. At some point I realized I needed to stop being a student and figure out where I was going to live and how I was going to make a living as a photographer. Realizing I probably needed to be in a large city, and that I didn't want to be cold, Los Angeles seemed like a reasonable place to start. It seemed sort of like Orlando, only 1000 times bigger.

A friend and I drove non-stop for 48 hours (24 of them crossing Texas!) in my VW Rabbit and I found a small garage apartment to rent in West Hollywood. There was a book called "American Photography" where commercial photographers showcased their talents to an audience of art directors who could theoretically hire them. It was the first time I really figured out that there were other ways to make a living as a photographer, such as in food, fashion, and advertising. The book not only showed the types of photographs these guys shot (they were all men back then), but it had their addresses and phone numbers, so I started calling the ones I liked to try to get a job as an assistant. It didn't take long to realize that you usually didn't get to meet the photographer, but their main assistant instead. One of the ones I called was Ken Marcus, who among other things, had been shooting for Playboy magazine. When I arrived for my appointment, his assistant said they didn't have any work for me at the time, but that Playboy Studios had recently brought in a new photographer, and that I should go there and see if I could get a job.

The Playboy studio was in an imposing building on Sunset Boulevard and the lobby had huge enlargements of nude centerfolds, just casually hanging on the walls, no different than if you went to the headquarters of Ford and they displayed photos of their most recent cars. My appointment was with their studio manager, Joe Frank, who turned out to be a charming guy from Georgia who made me feel completely comfortable. He had been the bass player in a soft-rock 70s band called "Hamilton, Joe Frank and Reynolds" that had a couple of hit songs, one of which is the very recognizable, "Don't Pull Your Love".

Back in the day, Playboy had a record company, and when that disbanded and the hits stopped coming in, they liked Joe so much they kept him on as their studio manager. I was quick to notice that Joe was talented at being able to make everyone feel comfortable and at ease, especially the young women who were taking their clothes off in front of strangers. It was a skill that would later become useful.

The studio had just brought in a new photographer to test named Steve Wayda. Without realizing I didn't really know what I was doing, they took a chance on me and paired me up with Steve as a freelance assistant. He was a pleasant, sort of quiet guy from Utah who had a talent for knowing how to make women look beautiful on film. I would be paid \$60 for each full day that they needed me. My job consisted of showing up around 9 AM and putting together the equipment that the photographer requested from the large store of gear at the studio. After putting all of this in a pile, a courier would come and pick it up and take it to the location we would be using for the day. During this time, the model would be in hair and make up, and the clothing stylist would be working with their vast array of tiny garments. Trying my very best to seem as if I could care less about their presence, I would see these young women first thing in the morning when they walked in. That's when it hit me that this was really just a fantasy machine. These young women had beautiful bodies for sure, but for the most part, without make up, they seemed pretty, but fairly ordinary. At that time, breast enhancement was almost nonexistent and Photoshop hadn't been invented. Hair styling, make-up, clothing and lighting made a huge difference, almost to the point of them being unrecognizable from the person who had walked in at 9 AM.

At that time, Playboy would do photo test shoots on over 200 girls each year to find the 12 that they would ultimately pick as "Playmates". (A lot of people misuse the word "Bunny" - that's the term they used for the cocktail waitresses at the Playboy Clubs). A young woman would send photos of herself in a bathing suit to the studio and then a decision would be made to see if they wanted to spend the money to fly her to Los Angeles for a real photography session. In my opinion, they all seemed worthy of inclusion, but there was a certain look, "the girl next door", as Hefner would say, that would determine the outcome. The entire studio was run by women, with only the photographers and assistants being male. Hefner evidently never came down to Sunset Boulevard, but instead, photo results would be sent to him at his mansion in Beverly Hills.

I'm often asked if I ever got to meet him, and I did one time, for a shoot that was held on the vast grounds surrounding his estate. It was an event they had each year called the "Playmate Olympics", where the girls competed in bikinis in various quasi-athletic events such as, "shimmy across the giant plastic covered pole". You can't make this stuff up.

I'm also asked if I had more personal close encounters with the girls. Unfortunately for storytelling, that answer is a big no. The one quick way to get fired was to act

inappropriately towards a model, as everything was very professional and almost mechanical in a way.

Clothing hides a lot, and the true talent of these photographers was to accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative. That was done with intricate posing, extensive lighting and strategic application of clothing. There was a joke that if you were a model in a pose, and you were comfortable, you were probably doing something wrong. The photographers were technically amazing and at the same time adept at putting people at ease and making a photo shoot fun for everyone involved. I learned more from them than anyone else I ever assisted. For the next year and a half I worked on and off for all of the major photographers working for Playboy, and it was quite the education.

My father never really understood what I did, but this job got his attention, and evidently he got a big kick out of it. I told him about one photo shoot I was on where the young lady was being posed on a diving board in a flimsy, wet garment, and my job was to bring warm water from the spa at the far end of the pool over to the diving board and pour it on her so she wouldn't get cold. When I got back home that Christmas, the story had been retold and amplified so many times that it was now common knowledge that Steve's job at Playboy was to keep the girls wet.

Usually we were dealing with young women 18 to 22 or so, most of whom had never been photographed by a professional, and certainly not in the nude. I do remember an exception, when we had a model slightly older and very experienced who said that she once had sex with Elvis. She seemed believable and told hilarious stories, one of which included that he called his penis "Little Elvis".

After a girl had been chosen as an actual Playmate, she was sent back to Los Angeles and paired up with a photographer for sessions that could take up to a month to complete. For this they were paid \$10,000, plus living expenses, and that was quite a bit of money back then. There were the obligatory shots with friends or family, fully clothed, that showed how she was just "a regular girl". Then came photos on location, with progressively revealing outfits, making her feel comfortable as the clothing came off. It's amazing what you can get used to, and grow to find normal, as a model and also as a bystander. As a man, if you're in the presence of a nude woman, usually there's a good reason and some sort of intimacy is a foregone conclusion. It's a bit of a shock to the system to be in the presence of a beautiful, scantily clad young woman, and your body has to come to the realization that your eyes will be the only participant.

These initial photos were usually taken at various homes fairly close to the studio, where for \$300 we would get the use of a house, yard or pool. We would then move into an actual studio, where fake walls, props and intricate lighting would be set up, often with the complexity of a movie set. I remember one shoot where we had about 30 different strobe lights all synching at the same time and lighting different parts of a bedroom scene, along with various body parts. The lighting was so exact, that once a general pose was created, the model couldn't really move at all. You can see now why this was not very sexy.

Up to this point, everything was shot with 35mm cameras, often with a bit of black gauze stretched between two clear filters at the front of the camera, to create a bit of diffusion. At the end of the day, I would take the Kodachrome film to the processing plant in Hollywood, and the next morning pick up the slides on my way into work. They would then be edited by the photographer and reviewed by the head of photography. A lot of this work was to determine the best angle and pose for what was ultimately the most important shot-the centerfold. Once that photo was mapped out, it might take a week of shooting and refining, day after day, for that one particular shot. One of the reasons that large fold-out (officially called the gatefold) photo appears visually different and sharper than the rest, is that it was always taken on a huge 8 x 10 camera, the kind where you stand behind it with a black cloth over your head, as if you were photographing Abraham Lincoln. The image on the piece of glass at the back of the camera is not only upside down, but dark and difficult to focus. The camera is huge and unwieldy and takes a crew to operate quickly. There are large film holders that have to be pre-loaded with expensive 8 x 10" color transparency film in a completely dark room, one sheet on each side of the holder. When everything is just perfect and the model is in exactly the right position, and the lights are all going off and hitting everything in just the right way, and the photographer sure that the image is in focus, the film holder is slipped into the back of the big box, the shutter is cocked, and at the perfect moment, the image is magically transferred to film. To do this quickly requires a three person team, as if you were changing tires at a pitstop for an IndyCar. The photographer focuses, the assistant handles the film holders, while another person checks the F stop and cocks the shutter. Finally, the shutter is tripped, the strobes blast, the slide goes back in, the film holder gets pulled out and turned around, and it's the same thing repeated as quickly as the three of you can do it. We called it the 8 x 10 "motordrive". The film was then sent by courier to a lab, where we would be able to see it in just a couple of hours, make adjustments, and start over again.

One time the film came back completely black from over-exposure and we did a number of tests to see what had gone wrong with the camera. It was eventually determined that the courier, who knew that this film was from a Playboy shoot, had opened the film holders, thinking that he would be able to see a photo of a naked woman inside.

I said that I had never gotten even remotely close to touching one of these young ladies, and that's true, except for one time, against my will, I swear. Ken Marcus was that first photographer I interviewed with, and I eventually ended up working for him as well. Ken had a different way of doing things, and everyone came to his studio on Melrose Ave, instead of going to the Playboy studio.

I would show up at 10 AM with film from the previous day, we would go out to a leisurely breakfast that he would charge to Playboy while the model was getting her hair and make up finished. I thought this was the best job in the world!

This particular shoot was with a young woman named Patti Farinelli, who went on to become "Miss December" in 1981 and was 21 years old at the time. She had the largest natural breasts I had ever seen in my life, along with an equally large personality and sense of humor. We all spent a lot of time together in that studio, and she eventually got very comfortable with her nudity around us. One of the jobs of the assistant is to sit in for the model while a Polaroid is taken to check lighting. I have a lot of these in some very funny situations, although always with my clothes on. At one point I was sitting in a boudoir, where Patti would eventually be photographed at the mirror. Unbeknownst to me, Ken had arranged for her to come out in her very tiny, very see-through negligée and sit on my lap, as Ken snapped a Polaroid to "check" the lighting. I hid my head in my hands to hide my beet-red embarrassment, and that moment is one of my favorite Polaroids.







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ALL THESE THINGS PEOPLE DO:
a bronx-bred fallen angel
unveiling her wilder side
in "the beastmaster"

TANYA



New York weather is rotten until the
ment Tanya appears. She's got on blue
yellow-striped minishorts, with a mate
top. Those eyes. Those legs. Sunshine
the rain.

She says hi. She says they've traipsed
over Lower Manhattan, from Green
Village to TriBeCa, looking at lofts:
want to be biocastal." That voice. A th
purr tinged. (text continued on page



The swan song of Charlie's Angels marked
beginning for scrumptious Tanya (above)